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Creative Approach Allows Aspiring Bilingual Dentist to Study in South America

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— A customized study abroad arrangement allowed Illinois Wesleyan University's Kathryn Rothas '14 to earn the degree she wants and compete in the sport she loves, as she works toward her goal of becoming a bilingual dentist.

Rothas is now in South America comparing healthcare systems in Argentina, Bolivia and Ecuador and taking customized Spanish classes in each country to fulfill the study abroad requirement for her Hispanic Studies major. Studying outside the U.S. is not unique; in fact, one in two Illinois Wesleyan students choose to study abroad for a semester, a year or during May Term.



Kathryn Rothas '14 (second from right) is comparing healthcare systems during her study abroad semester in South America.

For Rothas, however, taking a semester to study away from campus took the logistical planning of a space mission.

Changing her major from biology to Hispanic Studies halfway through her college career, Rothas was still determined to complete all pre-dental courses in four years. Adding to the challenge was Rothas' refusal to miss a spring season as a student-athlete on the women's track and field team.

Rothas decided she would complete the study abroad component as an extra semester, but wanted to find a program that would combine her interest in healthcare with a Spanish immersion experience. Guided by Stacey Shimizu, director of the International Office, Rothas found Child Family Health International (CFHI) where she could volunteer at a dental clinic in Ecuador. No student at IWU, however, had ever done a study abroad program that was primarily an internship without an academic component. But after collaborations among the Hispanic Studies department, the provost's office and the registrar's office, and adding additional components of observations and language lessons in Argentina and Bolivia, Rothas' program was approved and she was on her way to South America.



In her comparisons of healthcare systems, Rothas has found both private and public hospitals in Argentina and Bolivia have medical technologies and equipment on par with the best facilities in the United States. Creature comforts, however, pale in public hospitals, which are not heated, and lack even toilet paper and soap in the restrooms, Rothas said.

She's also encountered diseases not routinely found in the U.S. On her first day at the Hospital del Niño in La Paz, Bolivia, Rothas was troubled to observe preschoolers suffering from tuberculosis, meningitis and necrosis, a cell injury that can be caused by infection or

toxins.

Kathryn Rothas '14 at Isla del Sol, an island in the southern part of Lake Titicaca, Bolivia.

“It was an eye-opening experience and sad to observe young kids with such serious diseases,” Rothas wrote in her blog. She noted that the lack of knowledge of healthy lifestyle practices mirrors her experience volunteering at the Community Health Care Clinic in Normal, Ill.

Rothas said she has observed doctors in Argentina, Bolivia and Normal spend a large part of their time educating their patients about the importance of a proper diet, exercise and good hygiene. And in all three locations Rothas sees problems with adherence to treatment plans, where people never fill their prescriptions or don’t realize they need to continue the medications until further notice.

The most interesting aspect of her experience, however, is not the differences between healthcare systems, but the similarities.

“Every physician’s goal is the same, and that is to provide the best quality of care to the patient in order to maximize the quality of life,” Rothas said.

After returning to the U.S., Rothas will share information about her South American experiences in Medical Spanish and Hispanic Studies classes at Illinois Wesleyan and attend women’s track meets during the spring semester. Several dental schools have invited her to interview; Rothas hopes to begin those studies in fall 2015.

“Illinois Wesleyan remained true to (late president) Minor Myers’ philosophy of ‘follow your passion’ and allowed me to forge my own path in order to create the most meaningful study abroad experience for me,” she said.